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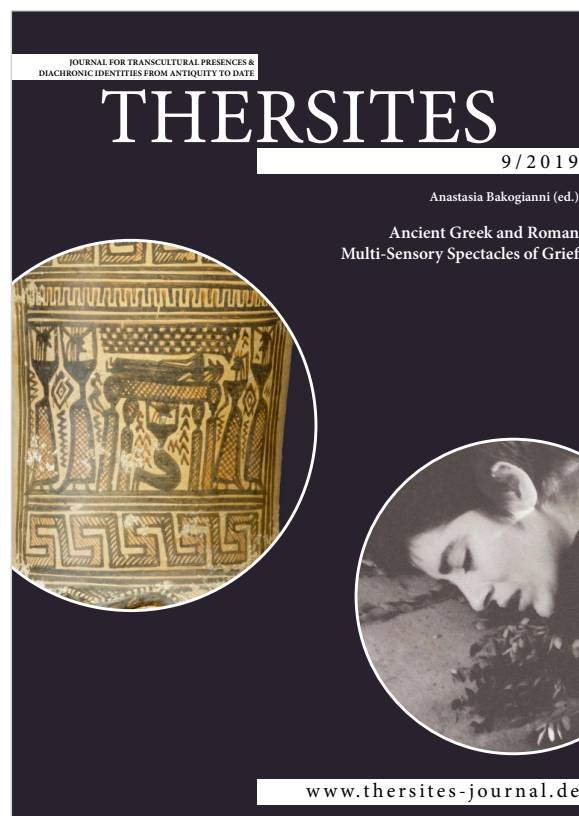
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'Too Young to Die'

Grief and Mourning in Ancient Rome

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ABSTRACT

Expressions of grief and mourning are characteristic of Roman funerary inscriptions. Roman epitaphs express sorrow for the deceased and reveal familiar emotional responses to memories of the dead person. In our ancient sources, death is usually depicted as something unknowable. Like in contemporary societies, only philosophy and faith seem to offer any measure of relief when faced with the horrors of death, particularly in the case of deceased youth (*mors im-matura*), unfortunately a very common occurrence in classical antiquity. Ancient texts and inscriptions provide us with a wealth of expressions of grief and bereavement for children and young people who died prematurely. Common people lamented the inexorability of fate by immortalizing their loved ones in epitaphs carved in durable stone. Latin texts supplement our understanding of Roman attitudes towards death in various ways, going beyond contemporary religious beliefs, ritual practices and traditional values. Nevertheless, the ultimate goal was to preserve the memory of the dead person, often by recalling specific traits of their nature. Lastly, the pain caused by the death of one's own children led to loneliness and a sense of abandonment, as shown in the epitaphs chosen by those who lived on.

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'Too Young to Die': Grief and Mourning in Ancient Rome

1. Introduction

Roman authors can and do help us to better understand our troubled modern world and age-old problems like how to cope with the death of a loved one.¹ Latin texts are today at the forefront of multidisciplinary research, at the intersection where philology, iconography and archaeology meet. The expression of emotions, feelings and other emotive reactions to fateful events in antiquity present social historians with an exciting conundrum because they force a closer examination of how the ancient Romans themselves understood and processed these emotional situations. Such investigations allow scholars to form historical assessments of the social behavioural patterns inherited from ancestors, an important aspect of Roman responses to death.² Roman authors tended to reflect on powerful emotions in philosophical terms. Robert A. Kaster, for example, has explored the key question of how they openly expressed intimate, private feelings such as embarrassment (*verecundia*), modesty (*pudor*), repentance (*paenitentia*), envy (*invidia*) and aversion (*fastidium*).³ Valerie M. Hope's work in this area focuses on exploring how the ancient Romans acted and understood pain, loss and sorrow.⁴ Luigi F. Pizzolato (1996) addressed the topic of *immatura mors* from the perspective of the classical and late ancient Christian world, arguing that we can form a meaningful connection between it and modern spirituality and practice. Like us, the ancient Greeks and Romans developed

¹ This paper has been improved thanks to helpful comments and suggestions from Anastasia Bakkogianni and Filippo Carlà-Uhink. The final English version was revised by the Language Service of the URV. I thank Alessandra Abbatista and Jesus Carruesco for kindly inviting me to take part in the Ancient Greek and Roman Multi-Sensory Spectacles of Grief panel at the 2017 ISCH Conference (Umeå).

² Hope (2007) 172. For more information on death in Rome, see Hope's analysis of the ancient evidence (2007, 2009 and 2017).

³ Kaster (2005).

⁴ Hope (2007 and 2011).

individual and social strategies to cope with the pain, anguish and fear engendered by death. When lamenting the death of a young person, responses centred on the interruption of their natural cycle of life. This was acutely felt by the parents, especially since these youngsters had managed to survive the high infant mortality rates prevalent in antiquity. Particular emphasis was placed on the *topos* of great expectations cut short by early death.⁵ Some scholars have focused on the Romans' acceptance of violent and/or premature death, especially in infancy and adolescence. I would like to draw attention to the work of two scholars in particular: Laura Montanini's research on the mortality of young mothers (2009 and 2010) and Maureen Carroll's valuable archaeological perspective (2011).⁶ My aim in the present paper is to explore Roman thinking and displays of mourning and grief as reactions to unexpected loss, mining our ancient Roman authors of the imperial period for examples of real practice in the form of ancient epitaphs and the funerary iconography developed for deceased young people. This is by no means intended as an exhaustive investigation, but I hope that it will serve as a useful exploration of Roman attitudes to grief caused by the death of young people.

According to the Roman way of thinking, emotions that revealed the irrational side of humans should not be openly displayed in front of the whole community.⁷ These emotions covered a wide spectrum, from extreme joy and enthusiasm to the deepest sadness, anger, disappointment, pain and fear. Such manifestations of emotional excess undermined traditional Roman values. The Roman way valorized self-control and decorum. The golden mean, the Horatian *aurea mediocritas*, was a cornerstone of ancient

⁵ On the archaeological evidence for high infant mortality in ancient Rome, see Scott (1999) and Pilkington (2013); on *mors immatura* as a literary *topos*, see Griessmair (1966); and on religious aspects, see Vrugt-Lentz (1960).

⁶ The subject of Roman funerary practices has attracted much attention. For archaeological perspectives, Toynbee's work ([1971] 1996) and, more recently, Carroll's (2006) are particularly useful. See also Hinard (1995), Pearce, Millett and Struck (2001), Vaquerizo (2002) and Andreu, Espinosa and Pastor (2011). On the architecture of funerary monuments, see Hesberg (1992). For an updated bibliography on Roman funerary practices, see Criniti (2016a).

⁷ See also Hope in this issue (132-134).

moral convention (*mos maiorum*), practised almost unchanged for generations until Christianity transformed the Roman Empire.⁸ Roman texts bear witness that this emotional inhibition was firmly established in their intellectual milieu. In private, however, Romans expressed pain in what we would consider a more natural way. Ordinary people were more disposed to share their worries and joys, and such evidence enables us to re-evaluate the traditional view. Epigraphy provides us with compelling evidence that the Romans did in fact grieve, especially in cases of sudden death due to illness or violence.⁹ The death of children or young women due to childbirth-related complications was deeply mourned. Tombstones give us invaluable information about how the ancient Romans dealt with sudden death. Their individual reactions illustrate human attitudes towards loss and grief. In what follows I examine two types of evidence. I begin by analysing several anecdotes found in our ancient Roman authors that deal specifically with the unexpected loss of children and young adults. I then turn to illustrative examples of funerary epigraphs and ancient iconography.

2. Roman Responses towards the *mors acerba* of Babies and Young Children

Death undoubtedly aroused – and still does – not one but any number of emotions and feelings. Premature death (*mors acerba*), an ungodly, unexpected and cruel demise that goes against the natural order of things (*kata moiran, sua die*), provokes strong reactions. Parents and the wider family express their grief by acting in a socially acceptable way in accordance with ancestral traditions that regulate mourning protocol. In such a context, the so-called “absence of feelings” over the death of babies and young children can be explained by exploring deep-rooted Roman philosophical and ethical principles. For example, in archaic times mourning was proportional to the length of time infants and young children had lived. Their funerals were

⁸ Pizzolato (1996), 45-83, who examines *consolatio* in a Jewish-Christian context, argues that acceptance of pain and death is a fundamental precept of Christianity.

⁹ On violent death, see for example Gunnella (1995), Panciera (2006), Buonopane (2016) and Ricci (2018). On women and femicide, see Clark (1998), Pavon (2011), Pasqualini (2015), Carucci (2017) and Casella (2017).

held at night in the strictest privacy, the so-called *funus acerbum*. This custom minimized the visibility of such deaths in the community to which the infant did not yet belong.¹⁰

Cicero reflected extensively on premature death. In one of his dialogues on happiness he argues that parents who lose children under one year of age have not yet had the chance to build up their hopes for these children's futures:

Idem, si puer parvus occidit, aequo animo ferendum putant, si vero in cunis, ne querendum quidem. atqui ab hoc acerbius exegit natura quod dederat. 'nondum gustaverat', inquit, 'vitae suavitatem; hic autem iam sperabat magna, quibus frui coeperat'.

They that complain thus allow that if a young child dies, the survivors ought to bear his loss with equanimity; that if an infant in the cradle dies, they ought not even to utter a complaint; and yet nature has been more severe with them in demanding back what she gave. They answer by saying that such have not tasted the sweets of life; while the other had begun to conceive hopes of great happiness, and, indeed, had begun to realize them.¹¹

Given the high mortality rates for infants and young children in classical antiquity, the longer they survived, the more secure their parents could feel about planning their future. To do so at an early stage was inadvisable. Dwelling on the pain of a young life cut short was considered excessive and even ostentatious. An example of this 'cold' attitude can be found in Pliny the Younger's letter to his friend Attius Clemens, in which he coldly criticizes Regulus for his lack of self-control on the occasion of his son's death, a young boy who had barely reached his teenage years:

Regulus filium amisit [...]. Amissum tamen luget insane. Habebat puer mannulos multos et iunctos et solutos, habebat canes maiores minoresque, habebat lusciniās psittacos merulas: omnes Regulus circa rogum trucidavit. Nec dolor erat ille, sed ostentatio doloris.

¹⁰ On lamenting the death of new-born and small babies, see Golden (1988) and Martin-Kilcher (2001). For an archaeological perspective on infant mortality, see Scott (1999) and various papers in Justel (2012).

¹¹ Cic. Tusc. 39.

Regulus has lost his son [...]. Now that his son is dead he expresses his loss in an extravagant manner. The boy used to own a number of ponies for riding and driving, dogs both big and small, and many nightingales, parrots and blackbirds. Regulus had all these slaughtered around the pyre. This was not grief, but a parade of grief.¹²

These beloved pets sacrificed on the funeral pyre of their young deceased owner reflect the iconography on sarcophaguses and epitaphs for infants. Such funerary reliefs portray children and teenagers happily playing with their pets, a visual reminder of frustrated potential. A characteristic example is the sarcophagus of Marcus Cornelius Staius from Ostia during the reign of the Emperor Hadrian.¹³ It depicts the highlights of a young Roman child's life, from a new-born to an older child engaged in his studies.

Even Pliny the Younger laments the death of the daughter of his friend, Senator C. Minicius Fundanus. He praises Minicia and describes her death as being due to illness. In this instance Pliny does give voice to his grief. He makes it clear that he admired her fortitude in dealing with her precarious condition. The author records her age and talks about her imminent wedding. In a tragic reversal of ceremonies, the bereaved father ends up spending the dowry he intended for his daughter's marriage on her funeral:

Tristissimus haec tibi scribo, Fundani nostri filia minore defuncta. Qua puella nihil umquam festivius amabilius, [...]. Nondum annos xiiii impleverat, et iam illi anilis prudentia, matronalis gravitas erat et tamen suavitas puellaris cum virginali verecundia [...] O triste plane acerbumque funus! o morte ipsa mortis tempus indignius! iam testinata erat egregio iuveni, iam electus nuptiarum dies, iam nos vocati. Quod gaudium quo maerore mutatum est! Non possum exprimere verbis quantum animo vulnus acceperim, cum audivi Fundanum ipsum, ut multa luctuosa dolor invenit, praecipientem, quod in vestes margarita gemmas fuerat erogaturus, hoc in tus et unguenta et odores impenderetur [...]

I write to you in great distress: the youngest daughter of our friend Fundanus is dead. I have never seen such a cheerful and lovable girl [...]. She was not yet 14, and yet she was wise beyond her age, combining the dignity of a matron with the sweetness of a girl and the modesty of a

¹² Plin. Ep. 4.2, as translated by Hope (2007:114).

¹³ [Sarcophage de Marcus Cornelius Staius](#) (Louvre Museum, Paris Ma659).

virgin [...]. This is a truly sad and untimely end. The timing of the death was more shocking than the death itself. She was already engaged to marry a distinguished young man [...]. I cannot express the grief I felt when I heard Fundanus giving his own orders [...] for the money he had intended for clothing, pearls and jewels to be spent on frankincense, ointment and spices for the funeral [...].¹⁴

The funerary altar of Minicia Marcella, whose name and age correspond exactly to Pliny's testimony, survives:

*D(is) M(anibus) / Miniciae / Marcellae / Fundani filiae). / V(ixit) a(nnos) XII, m(enses) XI, d(ies) VII.*¹⁵

Fundanus adopts a more traditional Roman stance in contrast to Regulus' extravagant display of grief. But we find a happy medium in Iulius Agricola, the 'perfect mourner'.¹⁶ This Roman general lost his one-year-old baby boy, and his son-in-law. Tacitus, praises his reaction to this loss:

Initio aestatis Agricola domestico vulnere ictus, anno ante natum filium amisit. Quem casum neque ut plerique fortium virorum ambitiose, neque per lamenta rursus ac maerorem muliebriter tulit, et in luctu bellum inter remedia erat.

Early in the summer Agricola sustained a domestic affliction in the loss of a son born a year before, a calamity which he endured, neither with the ostentatious fortitude displayed by many brave men, nor, on the other hand, with womanish tears and grief. In his sorrow, he found one source of relief in war.¹⁷

Agricola's self-control exemplifies the Roman military way. His loss is compared to a war wound whose aching must be endured.

This idea of loss as a wound can also be found in Seneca's words of condolence on the passing of his friend Marullus's little son. In his opinion the bereaved father acted in too 'womanish' a manner, which went against

¹⁴ Plin. Ep. 5.16, as translated by Hope (2007) 187.

¹⁵ [Funerary altar for Minicia Marcella](#) (*CIL* VI, 16631= EDR103422, Rome, Domitian Baths). On Minicia Marcella see Bodel (1995).

¹⁶ Hope (2017) 86.

¹⁷ Tac. Ag. 29.

Seneca's core moral and philosophical ideals. The philosopher condemns this 'indulgence in grief':

Epistulam quam scripsi Marullo cum filium parvulum amisisset et diceretur molliter ferre misi tibi, in qua non sum solitum morem secutus nec putavi leniter illum debere tractari, cum obiurgatione esset quam solacio dignior. Adflicto enim et magnum vulnus male ferenti paulisper cedendum est; exsatiat se aut certe primum impetum effundat: hi qui sibi lugere sumpserunt protinus castigentur et discant quasdam etiam lacrimarum ineptias esse.

I enclose a copy of the letter which I wrote to Marullus at the time when he had lost his little son and was reported to be rather womanish in his grief – a letter in which I have not observed the usual form of condolence: for I did not believe that he should be handled gently, since in my opinion he deserved criticism rather than consolation. When a man is stricken and is finding it most difficult to endure a grievous wound, one must humour him for a while; let him satisfy his grief or at any rate work off the first shock; but those who have assumed an indulgence in grief should be rebuked forthwith, and should learn that there are certain follies even in tears.¹⁸

Marullus's sorrow is condemned as reprehensible because he is acting like a woman. Indeed, the Latin word *mollis* alludes to gentle manners in connection with female deportment. When applied to men it becomes derogative, a way of reprimanding them for effeminate behaviour.¹⁹ Marullus's 'womanish' grief, however, is not the only Roman example of such behaviour we can read about in our ancient sources. A number of reputable men are portrayed as being moved to tears when faced with the death of their young children, although this generally took place in private. For example, Augustus used to kiss an effigy of his favourite grandson after the child's death:

Habuit [sc. Germanicus] in matrimonio Agrippinam, M. Agrippae et Iuliae filiam, et ex ea novem liberos tulit: quorum duo infantes adhuc rapti,

¹⁸ Sen. Ep. 99.

¹⁹ See ThLL s.v. "*mollis*" as a synonym of *effeminatus* (Isid. Or. 10, 179: "*mollis, quod vigorem sexus enerviati corpore dedecoret, et quasi mulier emolliatur*"). On effeminate men in Rome and how they were perceived, see Olson (2014).

unus iam puerascens insigni festiuitate, cuius effigiem habitu Cupidinis in aede Capitolinae Veneris Livia dedicauit, Augustus in cubiculo suo positam, quotiensque introiret, exosculabatur.

Germanicus married Agrippina the Elder, daughter of Marcus Agrippa and Julia, who bore him nine children. Two died in infancy, and a third, a charming child, just as he was reaching the age of boyhood. Livia dedicated a statue of him, dressed as Cupid, in the temple of Capitoline Venus; Augustus had another statue in his bedroom and used to kiss it fondly whenever he entered.²⁰

Portraits of children in a funerary context reminded those who saw them of a time when their young lives were flourishing. They were a tangible, idealized relic, like the statue of Augustus's grandson as Cupid. But, what about the common people? How did they bid farewell to their beloved young dead? To answer these questions we must turn to Roman epitaphs, which provide us with a range and variety of evidence from different social classes. This can help us to build up a picture of how the Romans mourned people who were 'too young to die'.

3. 'Too Young to Die': Roman Epitaphs and Premature Death

Acerbus is a Latin adjective that means 'immature' or 'unripe', mainly used to refer to fruit.²¹ When applied to the premature death of humans, it forms part of an ancient metaphor that can be traced back to Latin poetry, including that inscribed on stone. For example, in the following epitaph, Nymphé, a five-year-old girl, narrates her short life, comparing it to an apple on a tree, gathered prematurely. Death put a stop to the natural cycle of her life before she could accomplish any of the things expected of a woman-to-be:

*D(is) M(anibus) / Nymphes / Achelous et Heorte / filiae dulcissimae /
habe. / Tu [hic q]ui [stas atque spectas] monumentum meum, [aspice
quam indign]e sit data / vita m[i]hi. Quinque] annos / sui[--- pare]ntes. /
Sextu[m] annum insce]ndens anim[am deposui mea]m. / Nolite no[s
dolere, paren]tes: mori/endum fuit. Pro[pe]rav[i]t aeta(s). Fatus / hoc
voluit meus. Sic quomodo mala / in arbore pendent si(c) corpora nostra*

²⁰ Suet. Cal. 7, as translated by Hope (2007) 11.

²¹ See ThLL s.v. "acerbus".

*/ aut matura cadunt aut cit(o) acerba [r]uunt. / Te, lapis, optestor leviter
super ossa [re]sidat, / ni tenerae aetati tu [ve]lis gravis. / Vale.*

“To the Spirits of the Departed of Nympe. Achelous and Heorte (sc. had this made) for their sweetest daughter. Greetings! You, who stand here and look at my memorial, behold how undignified a life was given to me. For five years . . . the parents. As I was approaching the sixth year, I departed from my life. Do not vex yourselves, parents: I had to die. My lifetime was rushed. My fate desired this. Thus, how apples hang in a tree, thus our bodies either tumble to the ground when ripe or, all too quickly, they plummet, unripe still. I ask you, stone, to rest lightly above my bones, lest you wish to be a heavy burden to a tender age. Farewell!!”²²

Parental hopes for children were cut tragically short because of *fatum*, each person’s allotted time on earth established at birth. The tombstone of Telesphoris’s baby girl reminds other women-to-be about the precariousness of life.²³ She was a six-month-old baby whose parents wanted to memorialize her as a testament to the strength of their grief. They built a sumptuous funerary monument, which included a lifelike effigy of their daughter:

*D(is) M(anibus) / Telesphoris et / maritus eius parentes / filiae dulcissimi-
mae / queri necesse est de / puellula dulci / ne tu fuisses si futura / tam
grata brevi reverti / unde nobis edita / nativum esset et paren/tibus
luctu / semissem anni vixit / et dies octo / rosa simul florivit / et statim
periiit.*

Telesphoris and her husband, the parents, to their very sweet daughter. One must lament for this sweet girl. Oh that you had never been born, when you were to become so loved! And yet it was determined at your birth that you would shortly be taken from us, much to your parents’ pain. She lived half a year and eight days. The rose bloomed and soon wilted.²⁴

We only know the mother’s name, Telesphoris, because the father is identified in the inscription as her husband (*maritus eius*). Notably, the baby

²² CIL XI 7024 = CLE 1542. Lucca, Italy, as translated by Kruschwitz (2015).

²³ [Funerary altar of Telesphoris](#). Landesmuseum Mainz (inv. S996), Germany.

²⁴ CIL XIII, 7113 = CLE 216. Mogontiacum (Mainz), Germania Superior, as translated by Hope [(2007) 13] with one minor amendment.

girl's name is missing, perhaps because she was too young to have been given a recognized, confirmed name. Nevertheless, the beautiful relief commemorates their anonymous beloved daughter, described as blooming like a short-lived flower. This metaphor is one of the most common literary *topoi* used to describe a young life tragically cut short, not only in Roman texts but also in later literature.²⁵ In this particular case, the omission of the deceased baby's name could be explained because it is not as important as the fact that she died at such a tender age. The impressive monument with its beautiful relief of the deceased baby girl testifies to the importance of being remembered.

Another funerary *topos* was to blame fate and portray death as being jealous of youth and opposed to a full life (*invida fata, invida mors*). Afterlife divinities are portrayed as capricious and apt to reclaim their plunder:

[...] / *disce quisque pius pater es vel / mater qu(a)e generasti natos / habere bonu(m) est si non sint / invida fata sic tibi non rapiat mors invida tam cito / natos ut meis atque tuis / dignis <le>ve(m) terra(m) preceris / ut mors involtum vivat / semperque colatur / [...]*.

Learn this whoever you are, a worthy father or perchance a mother who has borne children, to have offspring is a good thing if only there were no jealous fates, for then invidious death would not carry off your children so swiftly, compelling you to beg the earth to rest lightly upon your children and mine, who deserve such treatment, and so that death must seem a living being before our faces, requiring worship always.²⁶

The death of children was viewed as a type of consecration *in forma deorum* for private worship,²⁷ and thus a type of sacred ritual. It is for this reason that some deceased children and young adults are represented as little gods and goddesses (for example, Augustus's grandson as Cupid). In a similar vein, a pair of siblings are depicted in a beautiful funerary portrait, one girl

²⁵ A famous example from Victorian literature is Tennyson's poem *In Memoriam A. H. H.* (VIII, 19-24). Rowlinson (2013) 44.

²⁶ CIL VI, 10731 = CLE 647 = EDR14999, Roma (Shore [1997] 68).

²⁷ See Wrede (1981) and Laubry (2015).

in the guise of Luna (an aspect of the Roman goddess Diana, divine protector of young girls before marriage),²⁸ and ten-year-old Iulia Victorina, also depicted as Luna next to an altar on the front, and Sol on the reverse.²⁹

Roman parents could choose to be represented alongside their dead children on funerary monuments. Couples or mothers are often depicted together with their sons and daughters on monuments that can be found from Pozzuoli to Palmyra. In the realistic funerary relief of the Servilii, we bear witness to the passing of a freedman's family, including the father, mother and their freeborn offspring. The freeborn young boy embodies all his family's hopes for social advancement, so he is depicted as a mature child, but his mortuary mask reveals that he was still only a baby when he passed away. Nevertheless, the iconography captures the idealized memory of his frustrated potential:

*P(ublius) Servilius Q(uinti) f(ilius) / Globulus f(ilius) // Q(uintus) Servilius Q(uinti) l(ibertus) / Hilarus pater // Sempronia / C(ai) l(iberta) Eune uxor.*³⁰

Unfulfilled promise is a recurring motif on the funerary relief of ten-year-old C. Petronius Virianus from Rome. His grandfather commissioned the monument, in which the child is represented as a little knight:

*D(is) M(anibus) / C(aio) Petronio C(ai) f(ilio) Cam(ilia) / Liguri Viriano Postumo. / Vix(it) ann(os) X, m(enses) X, d(ies) XX. / D(ecimus) Valerius Niceta / av<u>s nepoti fecit.*³¹

The family's expectations and hopes were destroyed on the child's premature death and this significant loss is being recorded for posterity.

Girls, like Fundianus's daughter, were expected to marry. Her fate was particularly poignant because she died just days before her marriage. The wrecked hopes of the families of nubile girls who died before marriage are depicted on a number of funerary monuments, such as on the altar of ten-year-old Caetennia Pollita, a richly clothed and bejewelled young girl,

²⁸ [Roman grave relief of boy and girl](#). Danish National Gallery in Copenhagen.

²⁹ [Altar of Iulia Victorina](#) (*CIL* VI, 20727), Paris, Louvre Museum (Ma1443).

³⁰ [Tombstone of Servilii](#) (*CIL* VI, 26410 = EDR115580). Rome, Vatican Museums (Augustan period).

³¹ [Tombstone of C. Petronius Virianus](#) (*CIL* VI, 24011 = EDR121426). Rome, Capitoline Museums (AD 100-110).

dressed as if for a wedding.³² Another example would be the funerary altar for ten-year-old Antonia Panaces, which is decorated with a reclining skeleton, a recurring symbol of death.³³ Such *memento mori* are typical of the visual clichés that Romans used to represent the uncomfortable but unavoidable human truth: 'remember (that) you will die'. Young deceased persons could be depicted alongside skeletons (Antonia Panaces) or, more palatably, as if they were sleeping (as on the sarcophagus at J. Paul Getty Museum).³⁴ However, death was and still is ubiquitous, as the Romans realized all too well.

Roman iconography for those deemed 'too young to die' reproduces tropes that are familiar to us. The parents' hopes and the offspring's potential are forever frozen in time. In the normal course of life, young people are expected to take care of their parents in old age, because it is settled on non-written rules of social convention. Death disturbs this pattern and causes much unease and distress in addition to the pain of loss. Such losses intensify feelings of sadness, and the process of ageing becomes more challenging, especially for those who end up alone.³⁵ Old age, bad health, poverty and neglect are matters of grave concern, in particular for widows, since only children can guarantee protection and proper commemoration after death.³⁶ The funerary monument commissioned by Papiria Tertia illustrates such concerns, although the quality of the inscription (a verse epitaph) suggests a well-to-do family. The elderly woman buried both her husband and children, so her lament is doubly sad, since she ended up alone in her old age. In the Roman context, such a mother would have been worthy of commiseration. Her condition was sorrowful like that of an infertile married woman:

*cernis ut orba meis, hospes, monumenta locavi
et tristis senior natos miseranda requiro.
exemplis referenda mea est deserta senectus*

³² [Altar of Caetennia Pollita](#). Mander (2013) nr. 71. Rome, second-century CE. Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.

³³ [Altar of Antonia Panaces](#) (*CIL* VI, 12059 = EDR140636). Naples, Archaeological Museum (inv. 2803) (AD 71-150).

³⁴ [Kline monument with a reclining girl](#) (inv. 73.AA.11) (AD 120-140).

³⁵ Ancient authors who reflect on old age include Cicero (*Sen.*), Plutarch (*An Seni*) and Seneca (*Ep.* 12). See also Parkin (2003) and Cokayne (2003).

³⁶ On young people's "duty of care" for old relatives, see Parkin (2003) 207.

ut steriles vere possint gaudere maritae.

You behold how I, bereft of my loved ones, erected their memorials, /
And sad, of a rather advanced age, and pitiable, long for offspring. / My
old age, in its abandonment, should be included among the evidence /
For the view that barren wives may truly rejoice.³⁷

4. Conclusion

Roman attitudes towards the death of young people range from the traditional prescription to avoid public displays of emotion (as in the examples of Marullus and Agricola) to ostentatious performances of grief (Regulus and Augustus).³⁸ These four case studies by themselves reveal the sharp contrast that existed between public and private performances of grief as attested to by Roman authors. Writers such as Pliny and Tacitus criticize exaggerated manifestations of grief in men and praise Agricola's self-control. Despite such high-minded moralizing, more emotive expressions of pain were quite common, as our epigraphical evidence confirms. Archaeology thus adds an important qualification to our understanding of Roman grief. Inscriptions of wealthy people might be couched in formulae and *topoi*, but they still testify to the importance of memory and the social representation of the deceased family member(s). In imperial times, deceased babies under three years of age were included in the family circle and viewed as worthy of being openly mourned. Memorials and effigies of baby boys and girls give voice to the sorrow and sadness of parents confronted with the death of their loved ones, and their effigies embody would-be people and their unfulfilled wishes and shattered hopes.

What separates Roman memorials from today's commemorative practices is the emphasis they placed on how these prematurely deceased young people would never fulfil their family's ambitions for them. The death of adolescent boys and girls was regrettable because they died before they could become productive members of the community, i.e. before they could begin their service to Rome. It is worth asking oneself whether the Roman ways of expressing pain for the death of children and young people is based on a morally codified attitude at a societal level, as Roman elite writers

³⁷ CIL V 2435 = CLE 369 (Ferrara, Italy), as translated by P. Kruschwitz (2015). Ausonius (Par. 9) wrote a reflection on solitude in old age. See Kruschwitz (2015).

³⁸ For a discussion of what was expected from emperors regarding this, see Hope's paper in this issue.

would have it, or whether it reflects the human need to relieve the grief and sadness shared by all classes of Roman society. The *immature mors* of children destroys their parents' hopes for them. Parents raising and caring for children expected in turn to be protected and maintained in their old age, but their dead offspring never achieved independence or became useful contributing members of society. This frustrated potential impacts those left behind, who are condemned to sorrow and loneliness. Investigating how the ancient Romans expressed their grief for those 'too young to die' can thus tell us a great deal about how they conceptualized and processed death and grief on an emotional as well as a societal level.

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